

## Book Reviews

### The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings

David F. Lancy

Cambridge University Press: 2008. Illustrations, references, index. xii + 466 pp. \$35.99 paper. ISBN: 978-0-521-71603.

The revival of interest in play behavior in both human and nonhuman animals over the last decade has been both remarkable and welcome. Besides hundreds of research articles there have been numerous scholarly and trade books on play, handbooks, encyclopedias, and many more in the works. General audience magazines are also having more articles on play. A new major interdisciplinary journal has been established, the *American Journal of Play*. Over this same period, the decline of free and outdoor play in children has been much deplored, along with cutbacks in recess, arts, music, dance in schools and the increase in excessively didactic regimented instruction. Are these two trends related? More pointedly, is play as critical in our educational system as many of us feel is the case?

Answering these questions is difficult, in part because much of the research on children, play, and education has been carried out with Western populations, generally middle class. Such research may result in cultural, geographic, and historical limitations. Such biases may be much more basic than they first appear. While much play, especially that linked to our primate ancestors, may be in some sense universal, the way play plays out in different societies may differ greatly in almost all respects. As in comparative studies of play and behavioral ecology with nonhuman species, describing carefully and assessing various populations with different ecological and social characteristics may help identify causal mechanisms, developmental pathways, and functional outcomes. Certainly anthropologists and others have described children's play in many cultures, especially in non-Western societies and those that still have limited access to modern technology and urban life. Little of this research gets into the textbooks and education manuals. It just seems too remote and exotic to be useful and relevant. We have David Lancy to thank for no longer letting us off the hook. His fascinating compendium on *The Anthropology of Childhood* not only embeds play into diverse, mostly non-Western cultures, but also embeds play into the life history of societies. His synthesis could be of great value for those trying to evaluate and implement play interventions in North American and European settings.

The subtitle, *Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings* refers to how children are viewed differently within and across societies. Sometimes, as in the West, children are stereotypically viewed as precious, innocent, and cute (cherubs). In some societies children are essential components of economic life and are put to productive activities very early indeed (chattel). In still others, children are inconvenient, unwanted, left largely on their own (changelings). Deformed, defective, and sickly children are considered demons, possessed, and unlucky. Rationales such as these helped foster selection, perhaps for offspring that had greater potential to be productive members of the tribe. Obviously controversies continuing over the last century on child labor, abortion, infant neglect, and child abuse, reflect both the ambiguities and mixed consequences that children bring to families and the larger society.

Lancy organizes his material in the stages of life from infancy to early and late childhood through puberty and adolescence. Sexual rituals, courtship, demography, and how children learn adult activities and are incorporated into social and economic life are also major topics. The book is an amazing source of detailed information on children in diverse cultures, but also incorporates much information on primatology, evolutionary psychology, sociobiology, history, and even archaeology. In a short review I can not give even a sampling of the fascinating and important information I learned, but I guarantee that any reader will learn a great deal and should ingest much to chew and then ponder. One thing that stood out is that our Western focus on education and didactic learning is alien to most societies, where children learn skills by observing adults and trying out activities for themselves with little formal instruction from adults. Play was actually much involved in this, but not necessarily recognized as such even when facilitated by (cont. p. 8)

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continued

adults making miniature tools and weapons for children to transition to adult competence. This may help explain why researchers on other animals seem so surprised that there is so little active teaching by adults of other species.

Each of the major chapters draws comparisons across modern dominant views and insights from the comparative anthropological literature and related biological and social science findings. The result can perhaps be best summarized by Lancy himself. "Often, we will see the contemporary view as being at odds with wider, older patterns and seek to explain how changes in the nature of parenthood and the exigencies of the modern, information economy have changed the nature of childhood. Contrast will also be drawn between the children observed by anthropologists working in intact, self-sufficient villages and their contemporary counterparts living in societies racked by poverty, disease, and civil strife" (p. 8). There are many intriguing bits of details such as how mothers play with infants and young children and the limited role of fathers. The current emphasis on paternal play with children may thus be atypical in our species.

Many societies are represented in this book and the geographic index is most helpful. Nonetheless, the book records example after example, all important and fascinating but some tables quantitatively comparing the cultures and summarizing similarities and difference, relating them to the nature of the societies ecologically, socially, and so forth would have helped. But regardless, the book left me both impressed and rather depressed. Without much overt commentary, the impression is strong that modern civilization is impacting negatively the social life of many societies, and play itself is one of the casualties

Reviewer—

Gordon M. Burghardt

University of Tennessee

Knoxville, TN

